Truth About the Failure of Nivelle's 1917 Offensive

French General's Plan to Crush All West Front Known in Advance by Foe

By Frank H. Simonds

SPEAKING in the French Chamber the other day, M. Painlevé, who preceded Clemenceau as President of the Council and thus Prime Minister of France, and had been Minister of War in the Ribot Cabinet and Minister of Inventions in the Briand Cabinet, made a sensational statement of the truth concerning the Nivelle failure of 1917, which resulted in the temporary disorganization of the French army, the summary removal of Nivelle and a long political and military controversy.

It was alleged by Nivelle's friends, and the story was published first in America, that French politicians had become panic stricken at the losses incurred by Nivelle in the first two days of his operations and that these politicians, members of the French Chamber of Deputies, succeeded in having the attack stopped and Nivelle removed at the precise moment when the German lines were crumbling and a supreme victory was in sight. It was further argued that Nivelle was handicapped by some failure of Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander in chief, to coöperate with the French.

The story was probably the most sensational in the whole history of military operations during the war; consequently, when I went to France last winter, I sought eagerly to find out exactly what had occurred. As to any failure on the part of Sir Douglas Haig, the story seemed inherently inaccurate, because in February, 1917, I lunched with the British chief at his old headquarters at Montreuil-sur-Mer, and at that time he spoke of Nivelle, who had only recently taken over command, with real enthusiasm and in tones which revealed his entire sympathy with Nivelle's known determination to abandon Joffre's "nibbling" and undertake a real aggressive campaign.

Secret Documents Studied

Through the courtesy of certain French friends I was able to make a careful and satisfactory examination of the still secret documents and facts in the Nivelle case and to talk with men who were both informed and entirely reliable. The results of the investigation, which are no longer subject to restraint, since M. Painlevé and M. Briand have opened the subject in the French Parliament, I now present to my readers and my impression is that they have never hitherto been printed in full either in the United States or France.

The circumstances which led to Nivelle's selection were unusual. It had become clear that Joffre must go, following the comparative failure of that Somme campaign of 1916 on which Briand, who, as Prime Minister, supported Joffre against attack, had depended to supply the necessary victory and to restore Joffre's shaken prestige. The natural choice was Pétain, and the world not unreasonably expected that the savior of Verdun would succeed the victor of the Marne.

Removal of Joffre

But getting rid of Joffre was no easy matter. The ministry was exceedingly fearful about it and to replace Joffre by Pétain meant to add insult to injury, for Chantilly, that is, the French G. H. Q., had seen the rise of the new man with natural if censurable heart burnings. The removal of Joffre promised to be far easier, if the selection of a successor did not put Pétain in his old chief's place.

In addition, Pétain, despite his great qualities, has more than a suggestion about him of our own General Sherman. He has a sharp tongue and, despite his habitual taciturnity, has said things about politicians, French and foreign, and about soldiers, French and Allied, which are not unlike the famous and caustic comment of Clemenceau himself. With the French politicians he was so unpopular that it was easy for Briand to pass over him and difficult to choose him!

Next to Pétain, Foch seemed to the outside world the logical choice. He had been Joffre's most brilliant lieutenant in the Marne; he had won the battle of the Yser and had commanded the French troops in the then recent battle of the Somme. But while the British and the outside world counted the Somme a victory, France counted it a check, and after the battle Foch's great army had been broken up and Foch had been assigned to a task which was little more than a disguised disgrace.

In April, 1917, exactly a year before he assumed supreme command of all the Allied armies, he was engaged in making plans to resist a hypothetical German invasion through Switzerland, and Paris gossip reported that he was completely used up, exhausted mentally and physically, by his great labors.

Aside from Foch and Pétain, Nivelle was, perhaps, the logical man. He had served with distinction under Pétain at Verdun and had succeeded him when Pétain was promoted to command a group of armies. While he commanded at Verdun the two successful operations which retook the forts had been made, although they had, in reality, been planned by Pétain.

Popular With Politicians

With the politicians Nivelle was popular. To the statesmen of Britain as well as of France he outlined stupendous conceptions with a coldness of manner and a calmness which captivated his auditors. In all ways he must be regarded as one of the remarkable figures of the conflict. He brought to British and French rulers, moreover, a colossal plan, with a guarantee of inevitable success, at the precise moment when immediate and decisive military victory had become a matter of life and death because of the submarine situation.

At Verdun Nivelle had seen Pétain accomplish striking results by carefully calculated estimates of the true relation between the forces available and the possibilities of the situation; in other words, by limited operations designed to reach local objectives. Nivelle now proposed to repeat on a front between Rheims and Arras what Pétain had done on a three or four miles' front on the Meuse Heights. When he came to Paris for the first time he told his amazed hearers the question was not one of short distances, that if his plans were put in operation the question and the sole question would be whether the Germans would halt at the Meuse or the Rhine.

Nivelle's plan envisaged a gigantic Sedan. Two groups of French armies—one commanded by Franchet d'Esperey, and operating west of the Oise; the other led by Micheler, and stretching along the Aisne—were to advance east and north, respectively, breaking the German lines and enveloping vast German forces, with consequent captures of hundreds of thousands of German troops and innumerable cannon.

Western Front Objective

In Nivelle's conception the whole western front was to be ruptured and the war won. In his opening conversations Nivelle told the fascinated public men who were his audience not merely that his armies would arrive at Laon on the second day, at dawn precisely, but also that he had prepared a time table for an advance to the Meuse. Twenty-four hours after the first attack had been launched the exploitation would begin and on the third day war in the open, war of movement, would recommence.

As this great operation for the liberation of Northern France could not succeed without the full coöperation of the British, Haig consented that Nivelle should exercise supreme command over the British as well as the French armies, with the single limitation that when the battle had terminated—and Haig was to decide this point—full freedom of command should return to the British field marshal.

Haig Praised Nivelle

Upon the British, quite as much as the French, Nivelle made a great impression. It is not true that British influence had contributed to his appointment. The selection was entirely a French matter. Still his mother had been English and he spoke the language with a certain fluency, much exaggerated at the time. His success with the British was due rather to his manner, to the distinction of his bearing, to the plausibility of his statements. Thus he carried the British with him and Haig, after preliminary objections, willingly and loyally enlisted as a subordinate in Nivelle's campaign. Moreover, for Nivelle himself Haig acquired a real admiration, and to those who talked with him in this period he spoke of Nivelle's fighting spirit in words of unqualified praise.

No sooner had Nivelle taken command than the very firmness of his faith in the success of his plan led him to amazing and fatal indiscretions. By January his orders outlining his great strategic conception had been issued and transmitted down to the very commanders of companies. By February every village in France, no matter how small, knew of the coming of the spring offensive and knew that it would be directed against the Craonne Plateau; what they knew the Germans were equally prompt to discover. Preserving a certain element of common sense, Nivelle first invited Pétain to command a group of armies whose mission it was to storm the Craonne Plateau. Pétain promptly pointed out the disproportion between the task and the resources. He did not believe the great plan would succeed; he said so, and as a result one of his three armies was taken from his command and given to Micheler. Pétain was thenceforth ignored.

General Robert Georges. Nivelle

The Russian Collapse

Meantime conditions changed. The Russian revolution broke out. It became clear that Russia was out of the war for the time being. This collapse brought paralysis to the Italian offensive, which was planned to coincide with the attack on the Western front, since it was clear that Italy would now have to bear the weight of Austrian troops which would be transferred from the Russian to the Venetian front. Joffre's original conception, which fixed November 16, 1916, as the day for launching his offensive, included as an essential condition attacks by the Russians and by the Italians. Nivelle's plan had presupposed the same element, but now the Russians and the Italians were out of the reckoning.

More than this, in the first days of February the Germans suddenly began their great retreat. Slowly at first, rapidly later, they drew out of their positions on the Somme. They evacuated precisely those lines against which a great offensive might have been launched with some hope of success.

On March 4, before the German retreat had become general or considerable, General Franchet d'Esperey appealed to Nivelle for permission to attack at once, as the enemy, was about to retreat. Nivelle answered on March 7—after a three-day delay—that a German retreat was inconceivable since the Germans had so strongly fortified their positions surrounding Roye; but on the day after the Nivelle dispatch reached d'Esperey the Germans were out of Roye. Thereafter followed the retreat and pursuit until the Germans were well behind the Hindenburg line.

Instead of an attack in circumstanes that Nivelle had planned, Franchet d'Esperey's armies now found themselves beyond the glacis of desert twenty-five miles in width which was destitute of all means of communication confronting a position, to attack which would involve months of preliminary preparation and the employment of formidable artillery which could not be brought up for many weeks owing to the destruction of the roads.

The great Nivelle plan had been comprehended in two formidable thrusts across the rear of the Germans in positions from the Somme near Pèrrone to Rheims, but the Germans, by retiring, had thus avoided one of the two converging thrusts. Nivelle had envisaged attacks from two sides of a square, and on one side an attack was henceforth impossible.

This was not all. In addition, the Germans had reinforced their positions on the Craonne Plateau so that where there had been two lines in December there were four in February, as Micheler had reported. They had concentrated their artillery, elaborated the caverns and grottoes on the Aisne heights, multiplied their concrete works and created an almost impregnable position. At the same time they were working on their Hindenburg line.

Thus, by the middle of March such chance of success as there had been for the Nivelle plan had vanished. The broad front had been narrowed by more than half, the remaining half had been sown with new defenses, and German reserves released by the Russian revolution were already beginning to pour westward. Meantime, while the chances of success were thus rapidly disappearing, circumstances had combined to create expectations out of all proportion to the remaining possibilities.

German Retreat Skillful

The retreat of the Germans, actually one of the most skillful pieces of strategy in the whole war, was represented to the French army and the French public as a flight—as the beginning of the end—and the French soldiers were in a white heat of excitement. At the precise moment when the high command, save for Nivelle and his immediate following, was unanimously convinced of the impracticability of the great plan, the army was filled with an optimism as dangerous as it was tremendous. Nivelle and the common soldiers expected a supreme victory, but the generals, and even the lower officers, recognized the likelihood of a check, with even greater losses than those of the Somme and with consequences to the morale of the army beyond estimate.

From all these officers there now began to flow protests and at this moment the Briand Cabinet fell. In the Ribot Cabinet, which succeeded M. Painlevé, the new Minister of War promptly discovered the chaos existing in the army. The relations between Nivelle and his subordinates were strained; these subordinates had lost confidence in their commander. Yet amidst this anarchy Nivelle's assurance had grown beyond belief.

The new ministry had now to consider the advisability of permitting any offensive, but the Russian revolution had made some operation necessary alike to help Russia, still apparently an ally, and to prevent a withdrawal of German troops from the Russian front for use against Italy, which actually did occur in the fall, with the resulting disaster of Caporetto. Finally, the submarine campaign was becoming so grave a peril that it threatened to win the war unless military success could retrieve naval failure.

The ministry was satisfied that Nivelle's grandiose plan could not succeed, but it inclined to favor a lesser offensive, with limited objectives, an attack which should be carefully planned and thus incur small losses while inflicting heavy casualties upon the enemy and achieving useful gains. Conceivably the initial attack might result in Nivelle's break through; if it did, well and good; then the operation might be expanded. This was the programme of the governemnt.

As for Nivelle, he heard all warnings, military and civilian, with contempt; he believed in a supreme victory. At the moment of attack he showed the government maps, which I have seen, calling for an opening advance of eight miles, and this optimism did not desert him when 25,000 French dead and 500 yards of gain were the total profit of the first day of the offensive.

On the strategic and tactical sides, therefore, the prospect of a great victory had vanished long before the actual attack on April 16, 1917. On the mechanical and technical sides the promise was even more dismal. Nivelle undertook to expand Petain's method, applied to four or five miles of enemy front, into an attack on a front ten times as broad, and he was not able to deal with so vast a problem, comparable with that which was successfuly handled by Ludendorff a year later. His armies were thus inadequately trained and the ways of communication were insufficient, while the medical service broke down.

Weather Was Against Allies

There were three other circumstances which contributed to the actual disaster—the weather, the folly of the command in the Fifth Army and the failure of artillery, due in part at least to weather conditions which made air observation impossible.

As to the first circumstance, the winter of 1917 was one of the roughest in half a century and the month of April was a time of snow and storm. The weather during the period of the actual battle was so bad that it was impossible for the infantry to follow the barrage of the artillery; the rapid-fire guns, machine guns and even the small arms of the soldiers were completely put out of service. The infantry threw away all its burdens; the black troops, which had shown their value as shock units on a score of fields, lost three-quarters of their value because of the temperature.

The second circumstance, the imprudence in the Fifth Army, amounted to the presentation of the enemy with the French plans. Three days before the battle a sergeant, carrying orders of operation indicating in detail the dispositions for the attack by three corps and the Russians upon Fort Brimont, was killed and his dispatch bag captured. Thus warned, the enemy reinforced the threatened points, and subsequent French attack did not result in the gain of a foot, while the loss of the 7th Corps alone was 15,000 men in four days. This blunder was duly reported to the French commander, and it should have led to the abandonment of the enterprise.

Artillery Preparation

Finally, the artillery preparation was done very badly; ten days of bombardment resulted in insufficient reduction of enemy works. Weather conditions contributed to this failure, but the chief cause was lack of munitions for so vast a front, itself based upon strong natural obstacles multiplied by skillful engineers.

In the face of all these circumstances and confronting an almost unbelievable anarchy existing in the high command—but with an army fired by the recent German retreats—knowing that their commander expected to break the German line, Nivelle, still unshaken, announced that he expected to succeed on the Craonne Plateau. This announcement was made to the government after the first attack—that on St. Quentin—had been made on April 14 and had completely failed, thus dooming the whole enterprise. Nevertheless, fixing his attack for the morning of the 16th, Nivelle repeated his familiar forecast that he would arrive in Laon at dawn on the 17th and that his cavalry would reach La Fère by sunset on the same day. Brimont was to be taken in five hours by that envelopment from the north of which the Germans had been so completely forewarned.

Therefore, just one week after the British had brilliantly launched their offensive on Vimy Ridge, but at the precise moment when their advance had been pinned down, Nivelle launched his waiting armies. The armies of Mangin and Mazel left their trenches at 6 o'clock in the morning in the midst of a tempest of snow, rain and wind. The aviation could not function, the artillery was dependent entirely upon ground observation. It was in vain that the trench mortars destroyed practically everywhere the first enemy line. An actual telescoping occurred with the mass of the German army, which had received and executed the order to die on its first line rather than yield.

Warned long in advance, the Germans had no fewer than four lines, with a depth of eight miles. These lines were literally stuffed with light machine guns, hidden in the innumerable grottos and caverns of the porous cliffs. The French armies were compelled to halt after the first hours, and the unforeseen pause jammed and blocked everything behind—organized for a great forward leap. This congestion and confusion of every sort still further aggravated the disappointment and disillusionment consequent upon a sharp check. All official records of the operations of the 16th and 17th of April in both French armies reveal with truly tragic monotony the essential fact that the complete check of the French attack was everywhere due to the multiplied use of enemy machine guns which had survived inadequate bombardment.

Successor of Petain Not Handicapped by Any Blunder of General Haig's

Germans Well Prepared

The machine guns had not been completely destroyed anywhere by artillery preparation, and precisely this machine gun fire, after the first hours, stopped the advance and broke the spirit of the best fighting forces of the French army. Some thousands of these guns, well used and well placed, thus proved sufficient to check in full cry the forward sweep of many thousands of veteran infantry soldiers confident of victory, and Americans will find food for reflection when they recall that, a little more than a year later, in the great battle of the Meuse-Argonne, their own soldiers, with even less adequate artillery support, wrestled with these same machine gun problems and suffered casualties well in excess of those which sufficed to destroy the French offensive.

Plans Crumble to Dust

On the morning of April 17, when Nivelle's victorious troops should have arrived at dawn under the walls of Laon, they were actually only a few hundred yards from their starting place, holding with difficulty the second line of the Germans. All the plans for later intensive exploitation of Duchesne's army pressing through the gap between Craonne and Brimont had crumbled into dust. Gains had been made, certainly not negligible; yet, given the glowing forecasts of the commander in chief, it is easy to understand the extent of the disillusionment alike of the government and of the French people. And public opinion held responsible for this disillusionment that commander who had produced it by the grandeur of his conception.

As to the offensive itself: Having failed to attain the expected rupture, Nivelle on the 17th, although he subsequently declared that he had stopped it absolutely at noon, directed Mangin and Mazel to shift their attack to the northeast and go on and in accordance with the original plan Anthoine's Sixth Army was launched against Moronvillers. Severe fighting continued over the next four days, fighting which increased the casualties, already great, and resulted only in small rectifications of the line, the most considerable of which was the reduction of the Vailly salient and the elimination both of the German ridgehead south of the Aisne and the position about the dismantled fort of Condé, from which the Germans had swept the valley of the Aisne east and west with enfilading fire.

On April 21 Micheler informed Nivelle that it was now necessary to give up the fight. In this letter Micheler pointed out that there were only four divisions of infantry available in the reserves of the three armies combined to deliver the attack which would achieve that prospective rupture which Nivelle still expected. This letter is an interesting document in view of the later statement of Nivelle's champions that new French armies were ready to enter the fight. Micheler in his letter proposed also that local operations should be resumed on April 30, which should include an attack upon Brimont still later on. In accordance with this suggestion of Micheler, on April 22 there was considered, and decided in principle the question of an energetic resumption of the general battle in the form of partial offensives—designed to gain both the Craonne Plateau, in order to uncover Laon, and the heights of Moronvillers, to unblock Rheims.

In point of fact, despite the later fighting, which included the taking of the Moronvillers heights but was marked by a new failure at Brimont, the battle of Craonne was over on April 25.

In ten days of terrible struggle the French army had been checked after a slight advance, inconsiderable by comparison with the British progress before Arras; its fighting spirit had been broken, the soldiers recognized that they had been thrown against positions unshaken by artillery preparation; their confidence in their commander in chief was gone. They were defeated troops; no camouflage, in reports of ground gained, could disguise from these veterans the fact that, having set out for Laon and La Fère, they had actually arrived only at the second and third lines of their foe.

30,000 Dead in 10-Day Fight

As to losses: On May 13 Nivelle made a remarkable statement to the Minister of War of his casualties between April 16 and 25. Therein he cited the number of the dead—whose deaths had been witnessed by at least two persons—as 15,500, and gave as missing 20,000, but only 5,000 of these 20,000 were afterward reported as prisoners; so, in fact, the killed in the ten days' fighting amounted to 30,000, while the other casualties approximated 70,000. The total loss was thus close to 100,000.

Against this terrible butcher's bill Nivelle could show only minor gains, which nowhere imperilled the main fighting position of his foes; and the capture of 23,000 prisoners, 175 cannon, 412 machine guns and 119 trench mortars.

Nivelle's grand offensive, then, had failed, and it was necessary for the British to prolong their costly and useless battle for many days to relieve the strain upon the beaten French army, in which now, for the first time, certain signs of demoralization began to appear. Meantime the government in Paris had been more and more alarmed by the size of the casualty lists; by the ever-increasing protests from the officers; by the unmistakable demoralization in the fighting forces, which was shown when veteran regiments, which had participated victoriously and gloriously in a score of struggles, declined to advance, and the Minister of War was called upon to sign death warrants of French soldiers who refused to be murdered in the hopeless gamble of Nivelle.

In the first two weeks of May there was then a real crisis, in which Nivelle, having lost the confidence of the government, his lieutenants, his soldiers, still continued the hopeless enterprise of breaking the German line, until at last, on May 15, he was summarily removed and Pétain was called upon to undertake the task of restoring the French army, as he had been called upon little more than a year earlier to save the situation at Verdun after blunders had permitted the Germans to take Douamont and almost overrun the last defensive position east of the Meuse River.

Haig Did His Part Well

Pétain's success was demonstrated at the Somme in the following March, when French divisions checked the great Ludendorff drive before Amiens. At the same time Pétain was substituted for Nivelle Foch became chief of staff and steadily grew in influence until he occupied in the following April the position of generalissimo, held briefly by Nivelle with disastrous consequences. Nivelle, after his failure, was sent to Africa, where, so far as I know, he still commands the French forces in that tranquil colony.

One word as to Haig. In accordance with the agreed plan he attacked on April 9, a week before Nivelle won a real, if local, success, performing all that was required of him and being definitively checked, as had been foreseen, in the Douai Plain on April 16.

His main operation for 1917 was to take place in Flanders. Because of Nivelle's failure he was compelled to make two more costly and useless attacks upon the Germans in the Douai Plain, losing exceedingly heavily, and this enforced extension of his Artois battle made necessary by French failure completly upset his Flanders program and contributed materially to the ghastly failure of that operation three months later when the Germans had been able to get reserves from Russia and the weather turned out bad.

British hostility to unity of command, which was revealed later, and was severely censured in America, as elsewhere, was in no small measure the natural consequence of the Nivelle episode. Actually Haig, whose part was to be relatively minor, won a far more considerable success than Nivelle, and continued the battle after his own plans called for a termination of the struggle.